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“FOR TOMORROW WILL WORRY ABOUT ITSELF”¹: IVAN ILLICH’S *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY* AND THE REDISCOVERY OF HOPE

JARED GIBBS*

INTRODUCTION

It seems as if Americans are always debating educational reforms of one sort or another.² Over time, this tends to give any thinking about ways to improve the nature of education a certain Sisyphean quality. And since our culture seems loath to release its hold on a conception of progress that understands it as unending improvement³, Sisyphus’s situation seems an apt metaphor for our own.⁴ In his book, *Deschooling Society*,⁵ (hereinafter *Deschooling*) Ivan Illich bases his critique of American schooling in part on an understanding of progress as a maddening idea.⁶ As he puts it, “the law of ‘rising expectations’ [is] a euphemism for a growing frustration gap”⁷ His move is to reject the idea that a system of perfect manipulation can be realized and result in perfect learning, in educational outcomes that always meet expectations.⁸ It is also to recognize that, as Orestes Brownson noted before public schools

* Instructor of English, Virginia Tech. An early version of this paper was presented at the Symposium *Radical Nemesis: Re-Envisioning Ivan Illich’s Theories on Social Institutions* at Western New England University School of Law on April 1, 2011. I would like to thank the WNE faculty for organizing and hosting such a wonderful event. Special thanks to Erin Buzuvis for answering my countless questions and arranging for my transportation to and from the Symposium. I would also like to thank Fritz Oehlschlaeger for reading and commenting on this paper many times during its development.

1. Matthew 6:34 (New International Version).

2. See Marcia Clemmitt, *School Reform: Should Evaluation of Teachers Rest on Students’ Test Scores?*, 21 CQ RESEARCHER 385, 394-95 (2011) (reviewing the last 20 years of education reform debates).

3. NEIL POSTMAN, *BUILDING A BRIDGE TO THE 18TH CENTURY* 24-29 (1999).

4. IVAN ILLICH, *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY* 109 (Ruth Nanda Anshen ed., Harper & Row 1971).

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.* at 42-43.

7. *Id.* at 108-09.

8. *Id.* at 108.

even existed in America, “[e]ducated, in some sense, all our children are, and will be, whether we will or not.”⁹

This Article considers Ivan Illich’s critique of schools as manipulative institutions, examining both the institutional spectrum he uses to evaluate the structure of modern schooling and the “learning webs”¹⁰ he suggests as alternative educational structures. It then explores the implications of Illich’s proposed “learning webs,” specifically focusing on the question of where common standards and authority are to be found within these structures. It concludes that Illich is purposefully vague in regard to standards and authority, because such issues can too easily become matters of manipulation and control themselves.

I. INSTITUTIONAL SPECTRUM

Illich’s *Deschooling* is really a collection of essays rather than one through-composed argument; its chapters present not one part of an argument after another but variations on the same essential theme.¹¹ That argument is, as suggested above, in large part about the problem of institutional manipulation. This focus makes, to my mind, chapter four of *Deschooling*, “Institutional Spectrum,” a key section of the book.¹² In it, we get something of a manifesto from Illich:

I believe that a desirable future depends on our deliberately choosing a life of action over a life of consumption, on our engendering a life style which will enable us to be spontaneous, independent, yet related to each other, rather than maintaining a life style which only allows us to make and unmake, produce and consume—a style of life which is merely a way station on the road to the depletion and pollution of the environment. The future depends more upon our choice of institutions which support a life of action than on our developing new ideologies and technologies. We need a set of criteria which will permit us to recognize those institutions which support personal growth rather than addiction, as well as the will to invest our technological resources preferentially in such institutions of growth.¹³

9. Orestes Augustus Brownson, *Review of Horace Mann’s Second Annual Report*, 2 BOST. Q. REV. 393, 394 (1839).

10. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 72.

11. *Id.* at 43.

12. *Id.* at 52.

13. *Id.* at 52-53.

The institutional spectrum Illich lays out is just such a way to identify those institutions that support “a life of action over a life of consumption.”¹⁴ His spectrum ranges from manipulative (right-wing) to convivial (left-wing) institutions.¹⁵ Manipulative institutions, according to my reading of Illich, have three main features: possession, definition, and production.¹⁶ Whether it is a jail or a mental hospital, a right-wing institution possesses its subjects—they are separated, set apart.¹⁷ This setting apart allows the subjects to be defined as well—they are labeled as criminals, as insane.¹⁸ Finally, these institutions are concerned with the production of certain behaviors and roles. Jails are supposed to produce civil, law-abiding citizens; mental hospitals are supposed to produce sane, rational individuals.¹⁹

The fundamental feature of convivial institutions, on the other hand, is that they allow for individual agency.²⁰ Being free to act as one chooses is, after all, the opposite of being manipulated. This basic difference, the dichotomy of action that defines Illich's institutional spectrum, allows us to evaluate seemingly similar institutions. One might expect, for example, that ostensibly benevolent social and civil service institutions would be convivial. Illich notes, however, that “service institutions” are found at “both extremes of the spectrum.”²¹ With right-wing institutions, “service is imposed manipulation” delivered through “highly complex and costly production processes,” which are designed to foster consumer dependence on an institution's service.²² Left-wing service institutions, on the other hand, provide “amplified opportunity within formally defined limits, while the client remains a free agent.”²³ The varied ways in

14. *Id.* at 52.

15. *See id.* at 53-55. Here, Illich does not use “right” and “left” in the way they are used in everyday American political discussions.

16. *Id.* at 53-56.

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.* at 54.

19. *Id.*; *see also* JOHN BENDER, *IMAGINING THE PENITENTIARY* (1987). Bender traces the parallel development of the novel and the modern penitentiary. He notes, for instance, that the “old prisons neither told stories nor assigned roles.” *Id.* at 26. But prison reformers, “beginning especially in England of the 1770s and prevailing throughout America and Europe during the 1840s, envisioned prison interiors as precisely refined instruments [T]hey aimed to reshape the life story of each criminal by the measured application of pleasure and pain within a planned framework.” *Id.* at 22.

20. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 54.

21. *Id.* at 55.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

which “service” is delivered, then, suggest that one may not judge an institution merely by its apparent purpose.

II. SCHOOLS AS MANIPULATIVE INSTITUTIONS

Illich labels schools as manipulative institutions, not convivial ones, so let us consider the extent to which they exhibit the three phenomena of right-wing enterprises: possession, definition, and production. First, schools possess children in a very real way, cloistering them, and supposedly protecting them from the real world. Earlier in *Deschooling*, Illich reminds us that this arrangement is a relatively recent phenomenon, the idea of childhood having appeared “along with the pocket watch and the Christian moneylenders of the Renaissance.”²⁴ Illich’s stance is supported by Neil Postman, who argues that the specific technological change that allowed for the creation of childhood was the invention of the printing press and the accompanying rise in literacy.²⁵ In other words, childhood developed in response to the increasing technological sophistication of the adult world; such technology requiring more time to master.²⁶

Once imagined as a separate class, it is perhaps inevitable that the decision would be made to separate children from the adult world in order to properly educate them. At the same time, classifying children as young people who do not know or understand “the way things are” is an invitation to infantilize and manipulate them. If the world is seen as too complex for children to fully understand, it logically follows—or so we are used to thinking—that children should not have to grapple with the realities of the world until they can fully comprehend them. The young, then, are set aside, set apart, and “prepared” for the real world. Illich worries over this institutionalized irresponsibility, stating that the invention of “[c]hildhood” has resulted in a loss of “the dignity and maturity of the young.”²⁷ His argument seems to say, “kids these days are too coddled,” the implication being that children need to learn

24. *Id.* at 26.

25. NEIL POSTMAN, *THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHILDHOOD* 36 (1982).

26. More specifically, Postman argues that as the printing press played out its hand it became obvious that a new kind of adulthood had been invented. From print onward, adulthood had to be earned. It became a symbolic, not a biological achievement. From print onward, the young would have to *become* adults, and they would have to do it by learning to read, by entering the world of typography.

Id.

27. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 26.

sooner about the harsh world they inhabit—they need to face the real world, as it were, which everyone knows is a cruel, unforgiving, and all-around tedious place to inhabit. Illich's conclusion, however, flips the usual complaint on its head.²⁸ The current arrangement, he implies, is to cloister the young, protecting them from the world's cruel realities until they are of age, at which point they must deal with it.²⁹ "If society were to outgrow its age of childhood," he writes, "it would have to become livable for the young. The present disjunction between an adult society which pretends to be humane and a school environment which mocks reality could no longer be maintained."³⁰ In the present arrangement, children are ideally initiated little by little into adult life, but full responsibility is not demanded of them, if any responsibility is demanded at all, until they have come of age. By this reasoning, schools not only possess the young, they define them. Not only do children know nothing and understand nothing, they are incapable of responsibility. It is worth noting that this arrangement is unfair to both children and adults—if the young are figured as wholly without responsibility, then it seems reasonable to conceive of adults as totally responsible. As Illich notes, "[s]chool, by its very nature, tends to make a total claim on the time and energies of its participants. This, in turn, makes the teacher into custodian, preacher, and therapist."³¹ In other words, teachers become totally responsible for childrens' education, which means teachers can be held totally accountable if the children fail to learn.³²

To possess and define children is really to objectify them. We often refer to children as our "most precious resource," which allows us to figure education as a production process.³³ Resources

28. *Id.* at 1-7.

29. *Id.* at 26-33.

30. *Id.* at 28. Illich's argument here is, to my mind, extremely optimistic. It is not at all a sure thing that a culture freed from the idea of childhood will take notice of its own inhumane attributes and correct them. The world was often cruel before the invention of childhood, and there is a good chance its inhumane aspects would persist even if childhood disappeared. In fact, Neil Postman, who was familiar with Illich's work and even mentions *Deschooling Society* by name in his own work, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, argues against Illich on this point. POSTMAN, *supra* note 25, at 139-41. He includes in his study a collection of child crime statistics that he suggests indicate "both the decline of childhood and a corresponding diminution in the character of adulthood." *Id.* at 134. In short, Postman argues that the disappearance of childhood results not in a more humane world but in both crueler children and adults. *Id.* at 138.

31. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 30.

32. See, e.g., Clemmitt, *supra* note 2 (discussing the current push for high-stakes teacher evaluations).

33. See POSTMAN, *supra* note 25, at 140.

are not “useful” until they are developed or manipulated in such a way as to produce a useful object. A cursory examination of educational language and metaphor makes clear the extent to which school is seen as a productive process. We constantly refer, for example, to the production of roles; I have heard students referred to as “active learners,” “productive members of society,” “critical thinkers,” “smart consumers,” “responsible citizens,” and so forth. This is not at all the same as saying that the young will by experience (succeeding in some responsibilities and failing in others), discover the importance of learning for themselves, coming to understand what it means to be a member of a community, and recognizing the value of a skeptical, critical mind. Instead, education is seen as the process by which a child is shaped into one or more specific roles.³⁴

It is possible, as we see, to understand schools as meeting Illich’s three criteria of manipulative institutions.³⁵ In chapter six of *Deschooling*, “Learning Webs,” Illich outlines educational institutions that he argues would be convivial instead of manipulative.³⁶ The main shift outlined in this chapter is that of the learner, from a passive recipient of institutional treatments to an active director of the child’s own educational interests.³⁷ Illich refers to this suggested system as “learning webs,” or “opportunity webs,” though, in relation to the term “web,” he notes, “I wish we had another word to designate such reticular structures for mutual access, a word less evocative of entrapment, less degraded by current usage and more suggestive of the fact that any such arrangement includes legal, organizational, and technical aspects.”³⁸ The purpose of these networks is to provide all learners with broad access to “fair

34. POSTMAN, *supra* note 3, at 125-26. Postman specifically suggests that a modern child’s primary role is as a market:

Children are neither blank tablets nor budding plants. They are markets There is very little the culture wants to do for children except to make them into consumers In this conception, a child’s mind is not the pages of a book, and a child is not a plant to be pruned. A child is an economic creature, not different from an adult, whose sense of worth is to be founded entirely on his or her capacity to secure material benefits, and whose purpose is to fuel a market economy.

Id.

35. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 53-56.

36. *Id.* at 72.

37. *Id.* at 73.

38. *Id.* at 76-77.

use" educational objects, as well as other interested, skilled, or knowledgeable individuals, with only minimal restrictions.³⁹

III. IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES

Thus far, I have attempted to outline, with some commentary, the basic argument that runs throughout Illich's *Deschooling Society*.⁴⁰ At this point, I think it is necessary to briefly cover two prominent aspects of the educational "reforms" Illich proposes in "Learning Webs,"⁴¹ and to consider a couple of problems with those aspects. I use the word "problem" here both because some will find the implications of Illich's proposals truly problematic, and because those proposals, though meant to be solutions to social and educational problems discussed earlier in *Deschooling*, carry their own attendant difficulties.

First, let us consider the economic implications of Illich's proposals. As noted above, Illich is interested in creating educational structures that give a learner broad access to educational objects and skilled, knowledgeable individuals.⁴² He goes on to argue that

[i]n a world which is controlled and owned by nations and corporations, only limited access to educational objects will ever be possible. But increased access to those objects which can be shared for educational purposes may enlighten us enough to help us to break through these ultimate political barriers. Public schools transfer control over the educational uses of objects from private to professional hands. The institutional inversion of schools could empower the individual to reclaim the right to use them for education. A truly public kind of ownership might begin to emerge if private or corporate control over the educational aspect of "things" were brought to the vanishing point.⁴³

Here, Illich appears to suggest that private property should be severely restricted. This suggestion, I imagine, would indeed be problematic for many individuals, and it would be easy to dismiss his

39. *Id.* at 77-79. The terminology Illich uses to describe his proposed learning webs is strikingly similar to that of the Internet. While the similarities and differences between Illich's learning webs and the Internet's structure deserve some sustained critical attention, I do not feel the need to give it that attention here. It is enough to note that the Internet can fill to a significant extent the educational niches Illich outlines in this chapter, though the ability of one to take full advantage of its resources and opportunities is still too highly dependent on individual technological investment.

40. ILLICH, *supra* note 4.

41. *Id.* at 72-73.

42. *Id.* at 77-79.

43. *Id.* at 86-87.

argument as extreme and wholly unrealistic. But Illich's property concerns are actually quite similar to debates about the role of private property in a democracy that have persisted throughout much of American history, and it would be worthwhile to step aside briefly and consider some of that history.

In his book, *The Revolt of the Elites*, Christopher Lasch in part focuses on the history of early Americans' emphasis on property ownership and its relation to competence and independence.⁴⁴ Jefferson, of course, is well known to have thought that the ideal democratic society was one of small, independent farmers.⁴⁵ This ideal was still visible, Lasch argues, when Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law:

The vision of the ideal democrat as the self-respecting artisan or agrarian in "his own workshop, . . . his own house," in the words of George Henry Evans, found legislative expression in the Homestead Act of 1862, which Lincoln hoped would give "every man" the "means and opportunity of bettering his condition." In the same speech in which he recommended the homestead policy on these grounds, Lincoln referred to "working men" as the "basis of all governments"—a pretty good indication that he conceived of property as a means not of escaping from labor but of realizing its full potential.⁴⁶

The point Lasch attempts to make here is that property ownership is important for developing competent and independent democratic citizens, because it teaches the value of labor and learning at the same time—they are intertwined. This fusion of labor and learning was fundamental to the way in which early Americans understood themselves as opposed to their European counterparts.⁴⁷ "In Europe," Lasch writes, "the laboring classes allegedly lived on the verge of destitution, but it was not only their poverty that staggered Americans but their exclusion from civic life, from the world of learning and culture—from all the influences that stimulate intellectual curiosity and broaden people's intellectual horizons."⁴⁸ He asserts that, unlike modern Americans, early Americans would have understood the idea of "equal opportunity" to be "a matter more of

44. CHRISTOPHER LASCH, *THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES AND THE BETRAYAL OF DEMOCRACY* 7-8 (1995).

45. See, e.g., *Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison (October 28, 1785)*, in *THE PORTABLE THOMAS JEFFERSON*, at 395-398 (1977).

46. LASCH, *supra* note 44, at 71.

47. *Id.* at 59.

48. *Id.* at 58.

intellectual than of material enrichment. It was their restless curiosity, their skeptical and iconoclastic turn of mind, their resourcefulness and self-reliance, their capacity for invention and improvisation that most dramatically seemed to differentiate the laboring classes in America from their European counterparts."⁴⁹

When Lincoln, then, stated that he hoped the Homestead Act would provide every man the means for "bettering his condition," he was not primarily speaking, as we do now, of material or monetary accumulation. Lasch explains that Lincoln

[i]n his 1859 speech to the Wisconsin Agricultural Society, . . . upheld a norm of intensive agriculture diametrically opposed to the wasteful, migratory habits of those who saw land merely as a source of speculative profit. He condemned the "ambition for broad acres," which encouraged "careless, half performed, slovenly work." He spoke highly of the "effect of thorough cultivation upon the farmer's mind." He said that it would prove an "exhaustless source of profitable enjoyment" to a "mind, already trained to thought, in the country school, or higher school." Nurture, not acquisition, was the burden of his exhortation.⁵⁰

Despite Lincoln's words, America was already moving toward a culture in which learning and labor were separated, and thus, a culture in which the learned and the laboring were two separate classes.⁵¹ Concern for this cultural shift can be seen in Thoreau's, *Walden*, first published in 1854, though begun nearly a decade before Lincoln's speech.⁵² Much has been written about Thoreau's skepticism in *Walden* regarding technological progress, the fruits of which he calls "pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things."⁵³ One modern convenience at which he directed his criticism was the railroad. Some of this disdain for the railroad was surely personal; its arrival had turned Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau's home, into essentially a suburb of Boston, which he saw as no good thing.⁵⁴ At the same time, however, his criticism of the railroad focuses significantly on the degraded circumstances of the laborers who built it. He writes:

49. *Id.* at 59.

50. *Id.* at 71-72.

51. *Id.* at 72-73.

52. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, in THOREAU: A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS; WALDEN; THE MAINE WOODS; CAPE COD. 321 (1985).

53. Thoreau, *supra* note 52, at 363.

54. RICHARD LEBEAUX, *YOUNG MAN THOREAU* 24 (1977).

It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages. . . . To know this I should not need to look further than to the shanties which every where border our railroads, that last improvement of civilization; where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood pile, and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked. It certainly is fair to look at that class by whose labor the works which distinguish this generation are accomplished.⁵⁵

Thoreau's description here is blunt and effective, and the biting sarcasm of the quote's final sentence belies his disdain for the inherent inequity he sees in the railroad, as well as for those Americans who turn a blind eye to it. It is also notable that Thoreau here makes a point of highlighting the impact of physical hardship on both the laborers' physical and *mental* health, writing that the cold and misery checks "the development of all their limbs *and faculties*."⁵⁶ This concern for the lack of intellectual stimulation in such wage labor appears again, following further criticism of the railroad.⁵⁷ Thoreau recognizes and addresses the natural desire for laborers to take pride in their work, to think of it as worthwhile and valuable to society, no matter how degrading:

'What!' exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, 'is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?' Yes, I answer, *comparatively* good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.⁵⁸

Here, of course, Thoreau means that he wishes they might have spent their time better than *only* digging in the dirt (he himself spends a good bit of his time at Walden digging in the dirt).⁵⁹ As he repeatedly reminds us in *Walden*, part of his project there was to discover for himself how little dirt digging was required to sustain a full intellectual life: "I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my

55. Thoreau, *supra* note 52, at 350.

56. *Id.* (emphasis added).

57. *Id.* at 364-65.

58. *Id.* at 365.

59. *Id.* at 446.

best faculties concentrated in it.”⁶⁰ For Thoreau, it is thoroughly lamentable that the “million Irishmen” building the nation’s railroads are forced by circumstances to live only in hands and feet, while their higher faculties atrophy.

Of greater concern to Thoreau, at least in terms of his audience for *Walden*, is what he sees as the atrophy of both the physical and mental faculties of that class of Americans who most benefit from the division of labor. This is where Thoreau’s concern for the intertwined nature of labor and learning is most clearly visible. He argues that by avoiding labor, and in some cases developing a general contempt for it, the leisure class does not further develop their mental faculties but neglects them as well: “Where is this division of labor to end?” he asks, “and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.”⁶¹ But Thoreau sees that some of his fellow Americans are indeed allowing others to labor and think for them, which, for him, is analogous to dying:

Much it concerns a man, forsooth, how a few sticks are slanted over him or under him, and what colors are daubed upon his box. It would signify somewhat, if, in any earnest sense, *he* slanted them and daubed it; but the spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is of a piece with constructing his own coffin,—architecture of the grave, and ‘carpenter,’ is but another name for ‘coffin-maker.’⁶²

It is only by combining learning and labor, Thoreau suggests, that people may realize the full potential of their faculties: “Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?”⁶³

The ideal of citizen as property-owner and artisan or agrarian persisted for some time,⁶⁴ despite the obvious fact that many citizens were, as Thoreau perceived, excluded or distracted from that ideal.⁶⁵ But the concerns of Thoreau and others went unheeded for

60. *Id.* at 400.

61. *Id.* at 359.

62. *Id.* at 360.

63. *Id.* at 359.

64. LASCH, *supra* note 44, at 62.

65. Thoreau, *supra* note 52, at 350-65.

the most part—there was just too much money to be made, and Lasch writes that

[b]y the end of the nineteenth century the “dignity of labor” had become an empty phrase, uttered without conviction on ritual occasions. The “laboring classes” no longer referred to the vast majority of self-reliant, self-respecting citizens; the term now referred to a permanent class of hirelings, escape from which appeared to be the only compelling definition of opportunity.⁶⁶

It was, he argues, the closing of the frontier that finally made America’s class problem too visible to ignore:

The Census Bureau’s announcement, in 1890, that the country no longer “had a frontier of settlement” almost immediately took on enormous symbolic importance. This “brief official statement,” . . . gave new urgency to debates about the “social question.” More than any other development, the closing of the frontier forced Americans to reckon with the proletarianization of labor, the growing gulf between wealth and poverty, and the tendency of each to become hereditary.⁶⁷

Lasch notes, though, that America has never really fully reckoned with the problems of wage labor, economic disparity, and inherited privilege and poverty.⁶⁸ He spends much of this portion of *Revolt of the Elites* discussing how we have distracted ourselves from these problems by shifting our focus from true equality in citizenship to equal opportunity—or social mobility—as well as equality of language.⁶⁹ He writes,

The recognition of equal rights is a necessary but insufficient condition of democratic citizenship. Unless everyone has equal access to the means of competence (as we might speak of them), equal rights will not confer self-respect. . . . Political equality—citizenship—equalizes people who are otherwise unequal in their capacities, and the universalization of citizenship therefore has to be accompanied . . . by measures designed to assure the broadest distribution of economic and political responsibility [possible].⁷⁰

66. LASCH, *supra* note 44, at 72-73.

67. *Id.* at 73.

68. *Id.* at 77-78.

69. LASCH, *supra* note 44, at 50-91. Illich himself, in the opening chapter of *Deschooling*, argues that, whatever language we use to frame public school, it does not—and cannot in its current form—promote anything approaching real equality, as economic status plays too strong a role in determining whether or not a student will be successful in school. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 6.

70. LASCH, *supra* note 44, at 88.

Lasch doesn't exactly call for public ownership of property here, as Illich essentially does in *Deschooling*,⁷¹ but he suggests an arrangement of property, responsibility, and competency that is similar to Illich's, while placing it within a tradition of American democratic thought. Illich's and Lasch's arguments are connected by a shared emphasis on, in Lasch's words, "equal access to the means of competence,"⁷² which, it seems to me, is what Illich hopes his proposed learning webs and expanded public property will provide. In the first chapter of *Deschooling*, Illich notes,

It should be obvious that even with schools of equal quality a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one. Even if they attend equal schools and begin at the same age, poor children lack most of the educational opportunities which are casually available to the middle-class child. These advantages range from conversation and books in the home to vacation travel and a different sense of oneself, and apply, for the child who enjoys them, both in and out of school. So the poorer student will generally fall behind so long as he depends on school for advancement or learning.⁷³

In Lasch's language, Illich here argues that, given the current class and property structure, it is folly to expect schools alone to equalize the means of competence, because middle- and upper-class students will always possess greater means outside of school for their intellectual development. This problem is what underpins Illich's concern for property and why his proposals take the form they do.

Let us consider, in closing out this section, one of Illich's suggestions in "Learning Webs," examining its property implications, and judging just how radical a proposal it is. He writes,

If the goals of learning were no longer dominated by schools and schoolteachers, the market for learners would be much more various and the definition of "educational artifacts" would be less restrictive. There could be tool shops, libraries, laboratories, and gaming rooms. Photo labs and offset presses would allow neighborhood newspapers to flourish. Some storefront learning centers could contain viewing booths for closed-circuit television, others could feature office equipment for use and for repair. The jukebox or the record player would be commonplace, with some specializing in classical music, others in international folk tunes, others in jazz. Film clubs would compete with each other and

71. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 86-87.

72. LASCH, *supra* note 44, at 88.

73. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 6.

with commercial television. Museum outlets could be networks for circulating exhibits of works of art, both old and new, originals and reproductions, perhaps administered by the various metropolitan museums.⁷⁴

If we overlook the outdated technology referenced here, which is really of no consequence anyway, it is easy to see that the repositories of educational artifacts described by Illich resemble public lending libraries. Though we are so used to them that we may overlook this fact, public libraries are specifically meant to address the issue of equal opportunity to some of the means of competence, a purpose that has persisted since the first lending libraries were established in America.⁷⁵ In his autobiography, Ben Franklin relates his role in the creation of a subscription library in Philadelphia.⁷⁶ He writes,

At the time I establish'd myself in Pennsylvania, there was not a good bookseller's shop in any of the colonies to the southward of Boston. In New York and Philad'a the printers were indeed stationers; they sold only paper, etc., almanacs, ballads, and a few common school-books. Those who lov'd reading were oblig'd to send for their books from England . . . I propos'd to render the benefit from books more common, by commencing a public subscription library So few were the readers at that time in Philadelphia, and the majority of us so poor, that I was not able, with great industry, to find more than fifty persons, mostly young tradesmen, willing to pay down for this purpose forty shillings each, and ten shillings per annum. On this little fund we began The institution soon manifested its utility, was imitated by other towns, and in other provinces. The libraries were augmented by donations; reading became fashionable; and our people, having no public amusements to divert their attention from study, became better acquainted with books, and in a few years were observ'd by strangers to be better instructed and more intelligent than people of the same rank generally are in other countries.⁷⁷

As is evident in the preceding quotation, in Franklin's case, the library was a means of addressing resource scarcity. Illich's repositories are also meant to address resource scarcity, but he asserts that

74. *Id.* at 84.

75. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, THE COLLECTION OF BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY 62 (1961).

76. *Id.* at 62-63.

77. *Id.* at 62.

it is an artificial scarcity.⁷⁸ The artifacts he lists are available, and generally in great numbers, but the barriers of capital and institutional interest restrict their use.⁷⁹ In one way or another, then, educational equality comes back to the issue of property. Franklin and his peers shared in a general lack of property in the form of books, and so nearly everyone benefited from the greater number of books made available through the library.⁸⁰ Illich's repositories sound radical, on the other hand, because so many of us already have access, in one way or another, to the sorts of property (educational artifacts) he lists, and so we are likely to feel as if something has been taken from us if that property becomes publicly instead of privately owned.

IV. STANDARDS AND AUTHORITY

Even if Illich's suggestions regarding private property were accepted, one might still reject his learning webs on the grounds that they would make it impossible to develop common standards of excellence or legitimate authority. Without institutional authority, who will determine what constitutes good work, accurate knowledge, or even truth? In short, if Illich gets his way, what is to keep learning webs from descending into anarchy? He does not directly address this issue, noting only that

[d]eschooling education should increase—rather than stifle—the search for men with practical wisdom who would be willing to sustain the newcomer in his educational adventure. As masters of their art abandon the claim to be superior informants or skill models, their claim to superior wisdom will begin to ring true.⁸¹

This statement is maddeningly vague, but I think we can tease out Illich's point here. Within manipulative institutions, claims to superior skill, knowledge, or wisdom are always suspect—they are just as likely as not to be another form of manipulation. Once the institutional framework has been stripped away, Illich implies, such claims will again carry weight, as a learner will be free to interrogate their veracity. This is an intriguing notion, but it still lacks the sort of specificity necessary for it to be compelling.

A more concrete way that common standards of excellence and legitimate authority might be achieved within learning webs is

78. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 79-87.

79. *Id.* at 79-83.

80. FRANKLIN, *supra* note 75, at 62.

81. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 97.

by combining Illich's ideas with Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of a "practice," as presented in his book, *After Virtue*.⁸² MacIntyre defines a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.⁸³

What one immediately notices in this definition of a practice is that the examples given are familiar to us as fields, vocations, or trades in which one might find employment. What is significant, though, is the extent to which these practices are subsumed and compromised by institutions concerned primarily with what MacIntyre calls external goods.⁸⁴

In explaining goods internal to and external to a practice, MacIntyre uses the example of a child who is enticed to the game of chess with the promise of candy, a certain amount just for playing, and an additional portion if he or she is able to win the game.⁸⁵ As MacIntyre notes, "so long as it is the candy alone which provides the child with a good reason for playing chess, the child has no reason not to cheat and every reason to cheat, provided he or she can do so successfully."⁸⁶ The hope, though, is that there will come a time when the child will become motivated to play chess not on the promise of candy but because he or she

will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now

82. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, *AFTER VIRTUE* (3d ed. 2007).

83. *Id.* at 187.

84. *Id.* at 194.

85. *Id.* at 188.

86. *Id.*

not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands.⁸⁷

As this example shows, external and internal goods differ in vital ways. External goods are “contingently attached to . . . practices by the accidents of social circumstance—in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status and money.”⁸⁸ What is crucial, MacIntyre notes, is that there “are always alternative ways for achieving [external] goods, and their achievement is never to be had *only* by engaging in some particular kind of practice,” not to mention that such goods tend to promote a success-at-all-costs approach to a practice.⁸⁹ Internal goods, on the other hand, are goods that can be achieved only within the boundaries of the practice itself. “We call them internal,” MacIntyre writes,

for two reasons: first, as I have already suggested, because we can only specify them in terms of chess or some other game [or practice] of that specific kind and by means of examples from such games [or practices] . . . and secondly because they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods.⁹⁰

Perhaps most important, as MacIntyre goes on to note, is that

[e]xternal goods are . . . characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is good for the whole community who participate in the practice.⁹¹

If we revisit the Illich quote at the beginning of this section, we can see that he may have in mind something very much like MacIntyre’s notion of a practice.⁹² When Illich refers to “masters of their art,”⁹³ it is likely that he is thinking of master craftsmen, artisans, practitioners, etc.—individuals who have mastered their respective practices by pursuing and achieving primarily goods internal to those practices. Illich perhaps also recognizes that such

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.*

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.* at 188-89.

91. *Id.* at 190-91.

92. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 97.

93. *Id.*

individuals, and the practices they represent, offer the best and relatively accessible and open framework within which common standards and legitimate authority can properly function. As MacIntyre explains,

[a] practice involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods. To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice. Practices of course, as I have just noticed, have a history: games, sciences and arts all have histories. Thus the standards are not themselves immune from criticism, but nonetheless we cannot be initiated into a practice without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far. If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok's last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch.⁹⁴

If practices, however, are to provide the common standards and authority needed within Illich's learning webs, there are at least two prerequisites. First, and most obviously, learners must be free to enter into any practice they desire, though their success within that practice is not guaranteed. Second, experienced master practitioners must embody the standards and authority of practices and not simply record them in institutional documents as rules and regulations. This second prerequisite is vital, not only for the obvious reason that living traditions are the only sort that carry any authority, but also because the standards of any practice are generated and extended through the pursuit of goods internal to that practice, which can only be pursued by individuals, not institutions. This is even the case when institutions exist primarily for the purpose of supporting and promoting a particular practice. As MacIntyre points out, institutions and the practices they support are, by nature, always already in a precarious relationship:

Practices must not be confused with institutions. Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external

94. MACINTYRE, *supra* note 82, at 190.

goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are the bearers. For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions. Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question—that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution. . . .⁹⁵

The ramifications of this precarious relationship are not difficult to discern, but let us briefly consider them, as they take us right back to Illich.

The relationship between internal and external goods is such that the pursuit of internal goods at times happily coincides with the achievement of external goods (money, power, prestige). In such cases, a practice's standards carry real weight and are easily extended by practitioners and the institution that supports them. At other times, the pursuit of some internal goods may actually work against the realization of external goods, in which case there are at least two possible outcomes. First, if the supply of external goods is sufficient, a practice's practitioners and supporting institutions will generally be in alignment, though each side will harbor some degree of ambivalence about the other. Second, if the supply of external goods is low enough to threaten the viability of an institution, the standards of the practice that institution supports effectively cease to matter—an institution will inevitably sacrifice them for the sake of its own continued viability. As MacIntyre illustrates in his chess-playing child example, once external goods become the primary motivator for participation in a practice, there is no reason not to cheat,⁹⁶ or, in Illich's terminology, "manipulate[]."⁹⁷ This institutional cheating/manipulation comes in various forms, but it always has the effect of undermining the standards and authority of the practice represented by the institution.⁹⁸ Because such under-

95. *Id.* at 194.

96. *Id.* at 188.

97. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 53-54.

98. *Id.* Illich, for example, refers to a "boomerang effect in war," such that "a higher . . . body count" means "more enemies," and so a country "must spend to create . . . manipulative institution[s] . . . in a futile effort to absorb the side effects of war." *Id.* at 54. In the same way, he asserts "that jail increases both the quality and quantity

mining of standards and authority can in turn lead to a reduction of an institution's power and prestige, that institution must ironically engage in further manipulation—at the very least engaging in what we commonly call “spin”—in an attempt to cover up or distract from its hypocrisy.⁹⁹

Looking again at Illich's proposed learning webs, this time through the lens of MacIntyre's conception of a practice, we might see his desire to redistribute property from private hands to the public's as an attempt to limit the circumstances under which institutions become manipulative. Property (wealth and the power and prestige that come with it) is an external good, so Illich's move to increase the public's ownership of and access to educational property is meant to help prevent his proposed learning webs—which are of course institutions—from facing circumstances likely to result in their having to manipulate to survive.

V. REDISCOVERING HOPE

There is an issue that remains, though. Illich's learning webs are meant to facilitate learning, not support chess players, cabinet-makers, historians, physicists, or other “masters of their art” engaged in other practices.¹⁰⁰ If common standards and authority are to be found in experienced master practitioners, where are we to find such people, and what institutions will support them? Illich's proposed property rearrangement would seriously imperil the viability of those remaining institutions that at least ostensibly support specific practices, which implies that he expects or hopes that those practices will persist by other means. At the beginning of *Deschooling*, after all, he notes,

of criminals, [and], in fact, it often creates them out of mere nonconformists.” *Id.* He goes on to argue “that mental hospitals, nursing homes, and orphan asylums do much the same thing . . . provid[ing] their clients with the destructive self-image of the psychotic, the overaged, or the waif. . . .” *Id.*

99. See, e.g., Patricia Cohen, *Wendell Berry Takes Back His Papers*, N.Y. TIMES, June 23, 2010, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/23/wendell-berry-takes-back-his-papers/>; Cheryl Truman, *Wendell Berry Pulling His Personal Papers from UK*, LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER (June 23, 2010), <http://www.kentucky.com/2010/06/23/1319383/wendell-berry-pulling-his-personal.html#ixzz0rgeddtAJ> (discussing the controversy surrounding the University of Kentucky's decision to name its new basketball dorm the “Wildcat Coal Lodge” in exchange for a sizable donation from the Kentucky coal industry, which led celebrated Kentucky author, and UK alumnus, Wendell Berry to withdraw his papers from the university).

100. ILLICH, *supra* note 4, at 97.

I have chosen the school as my paradigm, and I therefore deal only indirectly with other bureaucratic agencies of the corporate state: the consumer-family, the party, the army, the church, the media. My analysis of the hidden curriculum of school should make it evident that public education would profit from the deschooling of society, just as family life, politics, security, faith, and communication would profit from an analogous process.¹⁰¹

The deschooling process as framed by Illich is clearly meant, then, to not be peculiar to education but to be representative of the sort of change he sees as needed throughout our culture (hence *Deschooling Society*, and not, *Reforming Our Schools*).

Once we recognize that Illich's proposed learning webs suggest not just a reformed education system but a wholly refigured culture, the final chapter of *Deschooling*, whose inclusion may at first appear a bit peculiar, takes on a new importance. This chapter, "The Rebirth of Epimethean Man," focuses on the difference between hope and expectation, which is exemplified for Illich in the story of Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Pandora:

The original Pandora . . . was an Earth goddess in prehistoric matriarchal Greece. She let all ills escape from her amphora . . . But she closed the lid before Hope could escape. The history of modern man . . . is the history of the Promethean endeavor to forge institutions in order to corral each of the rampant ills. It is the history of fading hope and rising expectations.¹⁰²

If our culture has embraced the Promethean ethos, it has, according to Illich, completely forgotten Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. He writes, "[t]he Greeks told the story of two brothers, Prometheus and Epimetheus. The former warned the latter to leave Pandora alone. Instead, he married her."¹⁰³ The brothers' differing attitudes toward Pandora represent two responses to the idea of hope. On the one hand, hope is forsaken in favor of expectation; on the other hand, hope is embraced. Illich argues that we have forgotten the distinction between hope and expectation, and it is a distinction that must be rediscovered:

Hope, in its strong sense, means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation, as I will use it here, means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man. Hope centers desire on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks

101. *Id.* at 2.

102. *Id.* at 105.

103. *Id.* at 106.

forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim. The Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope. Survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery as a social force.¹⁰⁴

One way to read Illich here is to see him, in light of his emphasis on hope, as wanting us to return to a more primitive world. He notes that “[p]rimitive man lived in [a] world of hope. He relied on the munificence of nature, on the handouts of gods, and on the instincts of his tribe to enable him to subsist.”¹⁰⁵ Illich, however, doesn’t present such a world of hope as a lost ideal so much as he labors to illuminate the ways in which a wholly planned world, a world built around expectations, ironically traps us in our attempts to eliminate life’s ills.¹⁰⁶ He writes,

[m]an has developed the frustrating power to demand anything because he cannot visualize anything which an institution cannot do for him. Surrounded by all-powerful tools, man is reduced to a tool of his tools. Each of the institutions meant to exorcise one of the primeval evils has become a fail-safe, self-sealing coffin for man. Man is trapped in the boxes he makes to contain the ills Pandora allowed to escape Quite suddenly we find ourselves in the darkness of our own trap.¹⁰⁷

Such an ironic fate is one born of hubris, Illich suggests, and indeed another way to consider his hope-expectation dichotomy is as a humility-hubris spectrum. Prometheus is, in fact, guilty of classic hubris. As Illich notes, Prometheus “tricked the gods out of their monopoly of fire, taught men to use it in the forging of iron, became the god of technologists, and wound up in iron chains.”¹⁰⁸ And he makes a point of referencing two other mythical figures, both guilty of hubris, and both of whom are punished through unceasingly frustrated expectations:

Sisyphus, who for a while had chained Thanatos (death), must roll a heavy stone up the hill to the pinnacle of Hell, and the stone always slips from his grip just when he is about to reach the top. Tantalus, who was invited by the gods to share their meal, and on that occasion stole their secret of how to prepare all-healing ambrosia, which bestowed immortality, suffers eternal hunger

104. *Id.* at 105-06.

105. *Id.* at 106.

106. *Id.* at 53-54. A reiteration of the “boomerang effect” that Illich describes earlier in *Deschooling*.

107. *Id.* at 109.

108. *Id.* at 115.

and thirst standing in a river of receding waters, overshadowed by fruit trees with receding branches.¹⁰⁹

These figures should, Illich argues, serve to warn us of the paradox of progress: "A world of ever-rising demands is not just evil—it can be spoken of only as Hell."¹¹⁰

CONCLUSION

We can see, then, that Illich addresses only partially and vaguely the issues of common standards and authority in regard to his learning webs, because, as I suspect he would point out, they are just the sort of problems one would dwell on who knows only a world of expectation. To design a learning system in which standards and authority take precedence is, he would argue, to design anew the sort of manipulative institution he wishes to eliminate—questions of standards and authority are, after all, questions of control. Institutions organized around expectations—manipulative institutions—may seek to eliminate the disappointment, pain, and unpredictability of life, but in the process they will always ironically prevent us from being fully human. The structure of institutions organized around hope is necessarily vague, on the other hand, because such institutions treat humans as ends, seeking, despite inevitable disappointments, to allow us to act freely and, from time to time, perhaps realize our own transcendent potential. If such an arrangement sounds overly hopeful to our modern ears, perhaps that is Illich's point.

109. *Id.* at 109.

110. *Id.*

